

History of the Japanese Congregational Church (JCC) 1907 - 2007

The Founding of JCC

In the early 1900's, many Japanese who had encountered Christian missionaries in Japan had settled in Seattle. During the summer of 1907, the International Christian Endeavor Society's world convention was held in Seattle, and its Field Secretary, Mr Tasujiro Sawaya encouraged those with Congregational persuasion to form a church. With the help of Dr. Francis Van Horn of Plymouth Congregational Church, JCC was chartered in September 1907.

Pre-War Years (1907 – 1945)

JCC's first minister was Rev. Ryomin Inouye who was called from Japan in 1908. Services were held in a house located on the corner of Main Street and 8th Avenue South. Rev. Inouye returned to Japan in 1909, and in the next ten years, the church was served by a succession of ministers and interim ministers from Japan. In 1920, JCC became financially independent and aid from the Washington Congregational Christian Conference was no longer needed. In the same year, Rev. Seizo Abe became the minister and saw the church through a period of growth until he left in 1934. In 1922, with its Sunday School expanding, JCC moved to Main Street and 12th Avenue South in the former home of Bailey Gatzert School. Mrs. U.G. Murphy, a former Methodist missionary to Japan, became the Sunday School Superintendent, a position she held until 1942 when the Japanese were evacuated from the West Coast. In 1926, JCC began its first campaign to fund a new church building and three years later purchased a lot at 14th and Washington (?). Many fundraisers were held, and construction was expected to follow a few years later. In Oct 1929, the stock market crashed, and two years later the church lost its building fund when the Pacific Commercial Bank went into bankruptcy. In the aftermath of this devastating event, the congregation worked devotedly to build up the church. By 1940, the church was able to buy a four-flat apartment building at its current site. The building was renovated to house the sanctuary on the first floor and the Sunday School and parsonage on the second. In 1940, JCC called the Rev. Charles Warren, former American Board missionary to Japan. Rev. Warren served as minister until 1942 when the Japanese were evacuated from the West Coast. During the three-year period that the congregation was gone, Rev. Warren looked after the church building and the goods stored inside.

Post-War Years – Serving the Issei (1945 – 1986)

The Japanese were allowed to return to the West Coast in early 1945. As families returned to their homes during the first two years, inter-denominational services were held at the Japanese Baptist Church for the Issei and Blaine Methodist Church for the Nisei and Sansei until each denomination was able to call a minister. JCC was one of the last churches to leave. In 1947, Rev. Haruo Ishimaru from California was sent to Seattle to help in the resettlement of the church, and Kinosuke Ide, a lay leader, lead the services

for the Issei. In early 1948, Rev. Ai Chih Tsai accepted the call to serve JCC and eventually became the Issei minister after the Nisei were able to support a part-time minister in 1960 when they hired Rev. Robert Pruitt who served for several years. In 1962, a study by the Yesler Atlantic Street Project found that the church building was substandard and likely to be condemned. With the threat of condemnation and the difficulty of supporting both a Japanese- and English-speaking minister, JCC accepted the invitation of Plymouth Congregational Church to merge with them. The Nisei and Sansei moved to Plymouth in 1965 at the time when it was tearing down its old building for a new one, while the Issei planned to follow when the new building was constructed. However, when the new building was completed in 1967, the Issei decided not to move, primarily because they were reluctant to worship downtown and the threat of building condemnation was removed around this time. Although the three generations worshipped separately, the Nisei and Sansei joined the Issei for various church events, including the annual New Year's celebrations and church picnics. At the end of 1978, after 31 years of serving JCC, Rev. Tsai retired. JCC called Rev. Kazunobu Sai who served for five years before moving out of the area. By this time, the Issei population had aged and dwindled in number. Rev. Tsai returned to the church as interim minister, and it became clear that the aging Issei could no longer support a minister on their own.

Post-War Years – The Nisei and Sansei Carry On (1987 – Present)

In early 1987, JCC called Rev. Martha Hoaglund who grew up in Japan as the daughter of missionaries. Rev. Hoaglund preached her first sermon at the church in English and Japanese. As she was fluent in both languages, she expressed an interest in extending her ministry to the Nisei and Sansei who were once connected to JCC but did not have a real church home. Former members with their children were invited to attend the service on Easter Sunday with the hope that it would mark a new beginning in the life of JCC. Although it was a slow process, Rev. Hoaglund worked tirelessly to encourage the Nisei and Sansei to return to church along with their children. By the time she left in late 1990, a strong nucleus of the English-speaking congregation had formed and JCC called Rev. Stephen Luttio, a Lutheran missionary who had recently returned from Japan with his family, to continue bilingual services. Rev. Luttio along with his wife Betty encouraged the congregation to consider improving the facilities due to expanded programs and attendance. In 1991, a building campaign was begun followed by years of fund raisers. Due to budget constraints, it was decided to proceed with the building of a new sanctuary adjacent to the old building which would continue to house the Sunday School, coffee hour and other events. Years of fund raisers followed, and during the spring of 1997, a ground-breaking ceremony was held. Construction of the new sanctuary took about five months, and in September 1998, JCC joyously celebrated its beautiful new sanctuary with a service that approximately 100 attended. By this time, many of the children had reached middle and high school. To serve this important segment, Kim Kelly was asked to become the youth coordinator. Kim was instrumental in forming a vibrant and cohesive youth group who participated in many activities together, including Sunday School, Christmas and Easter pageants, Thanksgiving service, and Warm Beach church camps. By the time he left in 2003, many of the youth had graduated or were close to high school graduation.

The Future of JCC

With the graduation of most of the youth from high school, church membership has dropped over the last couple of years. However, the congregation of 30 or so remains strong in their faith and devoted to the church. With the grace of God, each generation of JCC members has been tested and persevered in the face of adversity. The church buildings not only support the many programs of JCC but also the expanding programs of the Seattle Bible Alliance Fellowship (SBAF) which is renting the church for its Sunday afternoon services. The members of JCC along with the members of SABC look forward to another century of worshipping God. Praise the Lord!